

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A23

WASHINGTON POST
18 May 1986

Nicaragua Feels Pressure to Sign Pact

U.S. Right-Wing Alarm Over Contadora Peace Treaty Is Factor

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An unexpected combination of events is putting heavy pressure on the Sandinista government of Nicaragua to sign a Central American regional peace treaty early next month, a move that would have drastic effects on U.S. policy in the area.

Final negotiations on the Contadora pact this weekend and next—and related talks among Nicaraguan rebel leaders in Miami—are at what all sides agree is a crisis point. Positions drawn and redrawn over three years of negotiations appear suddenly to be within shouting distance of each other, and what remains necessary is a kind of leap of faith that real agreement can be reached by the target date, June 6.

That next move appears to be Nicaragua's.

In one of several ironies, U.S. conservatives for whom the negotiations are anathema have helped to make the pact credible in Nicaragua's eyes. They are suddenly worrying out loud that the treaty on the table would leave the Sandinistas in power and halt U.S. support for the contras—counterrevolutionary guerrillas fighting Nicaragua's leftist government.

Cable traffic to Managua from Nicaragua's embassy here has been heavy with recent Evans and Novak columns and cartoons and editorials from The Washington Times denouncing the situation, according to Nicaraguan diplomats here.

"We had our doubts at first, but we're beginning to believe they really are worried," said one official. "That's very interesting."

Eight Republicans wrote to President Reagan last week expressing alarm over special negotiator Philip C. Habib's promise that U.S. aid to the contras would cease if Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega signs and observes the treaty brokered by the Contadora countries—Mexico, Panama, Colombia and Venezuela.

The Republicans in their letter warned that Nicaragua might sign without any intention of adhering to

treaty terms, and several have asked to meet with Reagan to get his reassurance of continued support for the contras.

State Department officials have expressed some bafflement over such concerns. They said that if official statements dating back to the start of Contadora in 1983 are read closely, they consistently endorse a treaty that is verifiable, comprehensive and binding on all parties simultaneously.

"We wouldn't buy a pig in a poke," White House spokesman Larry Speakes said last week.

If those three elements are present, he said, the contras would no longer be fighting but would be involved in Nicaragua's political process.

In a further irony, pressure on Nicaragua to bargain coincides with the nadir of the contras' fortunes, rather than resulting from strong contra military pressure as the administration had predicted.

The rebels' leadership is divided, to the point that Habib spent much of last week in Miami meetings trying to push the three factions into a more cooperative, civilian-run organization. Their military progress has been zero since their financial aid has run out. The World Court is expected in about two weeks to denounce U.S. aid to them as illegal.

Meanwhile, three congressional committees are probing charges that the contras are involved in corruption and drug trafficking. At a May 7 meeting, representatives of the Central Intelligence Agency, the departments of Justice, State and Treasury, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, House Foreign Affairs Committee and House and Senate intelligence committees reviewed the allegations and concluded that there is no evidence, according to people who were present.

But the probes continue. In an interview, Robert Duemling, director of the Nicaraguan Humanitarian Aid Office, said losses from the \$27 million aid program through corruption have been "tiddlywinks." As an example, he said the State Department inspector general's office is probing contra complaints that

when they donned boots from one shipment of 1,200 pairs, the soles fell off.

"Out of 70,000 pairs of boots, that's not too bad," Duemling said. He denied reports that his office had paid for 20,000 uniforms that were never received from a Honduran market, saying 20,000 were ordered, 10,000 had been paid for and 15,000 had been received.

Still, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee has scheduled hearings on the contras for the first week in June, which will renew public attention to the issue of whether the contras deserve more U.S. aid just before the Contadora deadline.

Perhaps the strongest pressure on Nicaragua comes from Reagan's continued drive for \$100 million in new humanitarian and military help for the contras. He refused a February appeal from eight Latin nations to delay the request until June to allow negotiations to proceed, but congressional reluctance to approve the aid has delayed it at least until June 9, three days after the Contadora deadline.

There is general agreement that the votes are there for renewed military aid of some kind. The debate last month was over the size and conditions of the assistance, not over providing it, and members vied to denounce the Sandinistas as intransigent and repressive even while criticizing the aid proposal.

The White House has promised to pursue the aid—even if a pact is signed—until convinced the terms are being observed.

Bosco Matamoros, Washington spokesman for the largest rebel group, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, said the aid must continue no matter what happens with Contadora.

"We are a key factor to the solution in Nicaragua. The aid is intimately linked to enforcing the conditions . . . there has to be leverage by us to guarantee the Contadora pact," he said.

But a signed agreement would change the congressional perception of the Sandinistas from intransigent to peace-seeking. That could kill the aid request.

"The Nicaraguans can count the votes both ways," a liberal Democratic House aide said. "We're telling them this is their last real shot."

The final negotiations are focused on spelling out the details of verification, comprehensiveness and simultaneity.

■ U.S. allies are expected to call for a system of verifying compliance that would involve about 1,300 permanent monitors and cost \$9.2 million to set up and \$40 million a year to maintain in the five Central American countries.

Nicaraguan officials have not objected to a tough watchdog system, which in theory would also protect them from renewed rebel activity. But Washington has refused to sign a protocol promising to abide by the treaty terms, which would in theory leave it free to decide for itself whether a violation had occurred.

One Latin diplomat said the cost of a good system would be negligible. "The United States is already spending \$1.5 billion a year in Central America. If they could have

peace for \$40 million a year, it would be a bargain," he said.

■ To U.S. officials, the term "comprehensive" means that the treaty must require Nicaragua to open up its political system not only to domestic critics but to the contras as well, plus reinstating freedom of the press, religion and so on. The treaty terms do this, but the consequences for failure to comply have yet to be negotiated.

To Nicaragua, "comprehensive" means military disarmament requirements that will end U.S. maneuvers in neighboring Honduras and allow Nicaragua to retain enough weapons to feel secure against the possibility of a U.S. attack. Treaty terms limit U.S. maneuvers but do not ban them, and Nicaragua has not defined what it means by a "cessation of U.S. aggression" that it insists must be verified.

Negotiators say they see room for an arms agreement in Ortega's declarations that "rifles in the hands of the people are not negotiable" while "offensive weapons" are. That could allow a reduction in the Sandinista army but retention of the civilian militia.

■ The question of simultaneous implementation requires delicate decisions. The treaty requires departure of foreign advisers and dismantling of foreign military bases; but allows six months for some changes to be made. U.S. aid to the contras may cease, but they already have said they will continue fighting on their own. Nicaragua has disavowed the presence on its soil of guerrillas from El Salvador and other nations; their departure could not be confirmed overnight.

"The key to the process is implementation," Matamoros said. "Nothing will be any good without that."